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RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 1310  
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RUEAHND/CDRJTFB SOTO CANO HO PRIORITY  
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RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUEPINS/HQ BICE INTEL WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEGUCIGALPA 001135

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/17/2018  
TAGS: KCRM KJUS PGOV SMIG HO  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR LLORENS' MEETING WITH MINISTER OF THE  
INTERIOR VICTOR MEZA

Classified By: Ambassador Hugo Llorens, Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Ambassador Llorens met with Victor Meza, the Honduran Minister of the Interior, on November 17, discussing delivery of humanitarian assistance following recent country-wide floods, the Minister's de-centralization efforts, migration issues, and a recent alien smuggling scandal under investigation by the GoH. (Note: The Interior Minister, known in Honduras as the Minister of Government and Justice, has wide-ranging responsibilities, including administration of Honduran courts; immigration, migration and foreigners; policy on municipal and provincial governments; and emergency planning and security. End Note.) Meza saw the recent work by municipal and departmental governments to distribute food and medicine to flood victims as a successful expression of his work to empower local officials and support decentralization efforts. He bemoaned the lack of a unified immigration policy for Honduras, vowing to establish and implement one before the end of his term as Minister, and pledged to work to educate the Honduran people on the importance of controlling the country's borders. In response to the Ambassador's questions, he also spoke at length about his Ministry's investigation into the "Cubanazo" alien smuggling scandal, and expressed concern that the Public Ministry had not proceeded to bring charges against any of those named in his investigation. The Ambassador promised to provide the Minister support, especially in matters of shared interest related to alien smuggling and trafficking in persons, encouraged him to provide timely access to Cuban migrants to DHS officials at post, and raised the question of the advisability of continuing to allow visa-free travel to citizens of Colombia and Ecuador. End Summary.

Delivering Flood Relief

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¶12. (SBU) The Ambassador, accompanied by the Consul General, engaged in a wide-ranging, open discussion of migration and de-centralization issues with the Minister. Meza recounted how he had been sent by President Zelaya to take personal charge of the acceptance and distribution of aid to victims of the recent country-wide flooding. He noted that in the past, central government control of aid distribution had resulted in massive inequities among those affected by disasters: the loyalists of the party in power always received inordinately large amounts. Though he recognized that his own participation in the latest aid effort could be seen as more central government meddling, Meza noted his own

personal long-standing apolitical nature had encouraged local officials to feel more accountable to their constituents, regardless of party affiliation, than to the party of the government in power. He also said his presence had allowed honest officials to distribute aid without resorting to traditional corrupt practices, and discouraged those inclined to enrich themselves out of the donations.

#### Cubanazo

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¶3. (C) Passing to migration issues, Meza regretted that the GoH still lacks a comprehensive migration policy, and that the Honduran Immigration Authority still suffers from lack of resources and staff, and is vulnerable to corruption at all levels. He noted that the recent "Cubanazo" alien smuggling scandal (reported reftel) had exposed this vulnerability to the public eye. However, though he and Foreign Minister Edmundo Orellana had completed in July what he considered to be a thorough and detailed investigation, the results of which named certain individuals involved in the scheme, the Public Ministry had not taken any further action, nor advised him of the status of their investigation. He explained that the case was wide-reaching, involving U.S. citizens or residents of Cuban origin paying Honduran diplomats to issue Honduran visas to their relatives on the island, then paying middlemen and smugglers in Honduras to facilitate their entrance to the country and subsequent departure to the United States. Though reluctant to interfere in any way with the workings of the prosecutors assigned to the case, Meza expressed concern that their apparent inaction reflected both the high political level of some of those involved, and their

continued lack of concern over the threat that such smuggling represents to Honduras and the United States. He expressed his opinion that, for example, Cuban intelligence operatives could use this route to gain surreptitious access to Honduras, the region and the United States.

#### Balseros

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¶4. (C) The Ambassador also asked the Minister about the GoH's handling of Cuban "balseros," who traditionally arrive at the Bay Islands or north coast by boat. The Ambassador pointed out the strong USG interest in interviewing these migrants to better understand their routes, gain information on their middlemen, and learn about their motives. Meza believed access to the balseros was routinely granted to USG officials by Honduran Immigration, but pledged to talk to his Immigration Chief to make sure that continued. He noted the difficulty, politically, of signing a repatriation agreement with the Cuban government, as relations between the two countries had recently undergone a significant warming. Similarly, the Cubanazo-inspired ban on issuing visas at the Honduran Embassy in Havana had been relaxed, though all such visa issuances were now being approved in Tegucigalpa.

#### Visa-Free Travel for Colombia and Ecuador

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¶5. (C) The Ambassador raised the issue of GoH bilateral agreements with Colombia and Ecuador permitting visa-free travel to Honduras for citizens of those countries. Meza concurred that such agreements were "problematic," especially in the case of Ecuador. Immigration officials were seeing increased numbers of travelers from that country that seemed to be coming to Honduras with no other purpose than traveling onward to the United States. He also worried about recent cases of Colombians who had entered Honduras without visas then successfully obtained Honduran identity documents, including passports. Meza was concerned that Colombian narco-traffickers were strengthening their networks in Honduras to further facilitate transshipments of their products. (Note: Meza stopped short of agreeing to re-visit these accords, which were concluded at the Presidential level, but the Foreign Ministry subsequently contacted the Consul General to seek Embassy input on formulating a strategy for rolling back the Ecuadorian visa exemption - the Colombian exemption,

promulgated at the Presidential level was deemed too politically sensitive to address at this time. The CG subsequently contacted Honduran Immigration officials to request they provide the Foreign Ministry with a detailed report of problems with travelers from Ecuador. End Note.)

#### Migrant Reception Centers

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¶6. (U) Finally, the Ambassador lauded the efforts of Meza's Ministry to support migrant reception centers in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula which work to ease the re-entry of Hondurans deported by the United States. Meza agreed that re-integrating returned Hondurans should be a key part of his proposed comprehensive migration policy. He believed that reported Hondurans represent a huge, untapped resource for the country, as most of those returned were hard-working and had gained experience and skill in a variety of fields during their time in the United States. He hoped to be able to direct more resources to the reception centers both to address their immediate needs and to help gather information on the deportees, and then to work in conjunction with private industry to match up potential workers with jobs.

¶7. (C) Comment: Minister Meza, though predicted by many to fail as a minister due to lack of political savvy, has shown himself to be an effective and energetic proponent of de-centralization efforts and migration reform. His strong leftist and intellectual credentials (he ran a think tank prior to becoming Minister), along with his close relationship with President Zelaya, permit him to remain above the political fray and to focus on the issues he cares about. Meza expressed some worry about anti-democratic political trends in Central America, but is himself an example of the great strides Honduras has taken towards democracy: he was a member of the Honduran Communist Party

in the '80s who has moved to the center to become a strong advocate for good government. End Comment

LLORENS